Anti-Calvinism and the Ayrshire Enlightenment

Colin Kidd

This essay locates Burns in the context of the intense and combative ecclesiastical politics of Ayrshire during the second half of the eighteenth century, a period when the county saw not only a culture of robust pamphleteering on theological matters but also a couple of high-profile heresy trials. Whereas the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole was, the issue of lay patronage apart, a relatively sedate affair which—surprisingly—witnessed no major theological controversies over subscription to the Calvinist doctrines enshrined in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), Ayrshire was a disputatious outlier from those consensual norms. There was a marked theological gulf in Burns's Ayrshire between hardline Calvinist 'auld lichts' and theologically liberal anti-Calvinist 'new lichts', including the Reverend William McGill of Ayr, who was tried for heresy, and the polymathic layman John Goudie of Kilmarnock, who published a direct attack on the doctrine of original sin which Burns celebrated in verse. Burns's ecclesiastical satires emerged in a local environment of

vigorous, vicious and personalized theological debate, much of it focused on the core doctrines of Calvinism.

Calvinism, anti-Calvinism, ecclesiastical, subscription, doctrine, heresy

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C16P1 Late eighteenth-century Ayrshire witnessed an uninhibited assault on the central doctrines of Calvinism: an attack of a sort that was a rarity in Scotland during the Enlightenment era (Kidd 2015). Here the Enlightenment in Burns's Ayrshire seems to have diverged significantly from the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole. This essay aims to trace in some detail the patterns of ecclesiastical partisanship, theological debate, and personal animosity in late eighteenth-century Ayrshire, the world that gave rise to Burns. Anti-Calvinism significantly shaped Burns's outlook and gave the poet a high-flown subject that

matched his gifts for subtle exposition, satirical engagement—and deflation. Liberal theology was a matter of urgent local controversy, and it was part of the poet's marrow. He favoured a religion of the heart, not the costive compassionless religiosity he associated with a dry, legalistic Calvinism and the smug assurance of the self-appointed elect, those he termed the 'unco' guid, or the rigidly righteous' (Burns 1969: 37–9). Burns eagerly satirized local Calvinists and their hypocrisies, in addition to championing the cause of those liberal ministers attempting to align the doctrines of the Kirk more closely with the idea of a loving deity. Burns's religious opinions and his relationship with the Ayrshire Enlightenment are not mere sideshows in his career: they are the main event. The openly espoused anti-Calvinism that makes Ayrshire different from the rest of late eighteenth-century Scotland is integral to what makes Burns tick as a poet, one whose lyric genius and comedic voice have tended until recently to drown out critical appreciation of the rustic bard as a poet of ideas.

C16P2 With the notorious exception of David Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment was not the scene of a direct onslaught on religion; indeed, quite the reverse, for the moderate party within the established Church of Scotland championed new approaches in history, moral philosophy, belles-lettres and rhetoric, the natural sciences, economic improvement, and the study of society without ostensibly challenging the reigning Calvinist doctrine in the Kirk. This is surprising in certain respects. It seems hard to reconcile the moderates as sponsors and purveyors of the new learning—and indeed their protection of Hume from heresy charges—with the Calvinism of the Kirk's confessional standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), whose subscription had been enshrined in law at the Glorious Revolution of 1689–90 as the test of orthodoxy demanded of Scottish ministers. For the Westminster Confession put the fall of man and his redemption at the heart of Scottish Presbyterianism. God's eternal decrees for humankind are presented in chapter III, which rationalizes the judicial outcomes of double predestination, everlasting

heavenly rewards for a limited number, ‘so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished’, and the rest of humanity ordained to ‘dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice’. God looms large here as a harsh judge who ‘extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth’, though appears more costively withholding than generous in his bounty. In addition, chapter VI of the Confession sets out with some starkness the bleak incapacity of fallen humanity, ‘dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body’. From this ‘original corruption’, which was biologically transmitted from generation to generation, humanity was left ‘utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil’. In other words, there was no intrinsic good in people.

C16P3 Notwithstanding the Confession’s assumptions about a lapsed and degenerate human nature—which seems inconsistent with the views of human potentiality and progress, of benevolence, moral sense and the sentiments, encountered in the ethical, sociological and historical works

of the Scottish Enlightenment—the moderates never openly contested the dark Calvinist dogma which served—officially at least—as the philosophical foundation of Scotland's Kirk and university establishment throughout the eighteenth century. Were the moderates closet anti-Calvinist hypocrites, as some of their opponents suggested, or disciplined ecclesiastical politicians who prudently sidestepped the implications of the new learning, or the genuine Calvinists they professed to be? The question remains open, and is difficult to answer, given the relative silence of the sources. The moderates were at most surreptitiously heterodox, their dominant tendency being not so much to criticize as to historicize credal statements (Kidd 2004).

C16P4 Only in the region to the south-west of Glasgow, in Ayrshire especially during the age of Burns, do we see anything like an articulate anti-Calvinism in moderate circles. The circumstances in which Burns composed his ecclesiastical satires were bruising and nettlesome, marked by fierce disputation between hardline Calvinist heresy

hunters and liberals, who were openly anti-Calvinist in their theology. Why Ayrshire? Part of the answer is immediately obvious. Among the anti-Calvinists was Burns himself, who, in a letter to Miss Rachel Dunlop, declared himself at war 'with that doctrine of our reverend priesthood, that "we are born into this world bond slaves of iniquity and slaves of perdition"' (Mackay 1987: 475). Was Burns's satirical genius itself a significant catalyst in inciting the outspoken liberal exceptionalism of Ayrshire's anti-Calvinist Enlightenment? Or was Burns merely responding to the peculiarities of his milieu? On close inspection, certainly, the poet's home county appears to have diverged dramatically from eighteenth-century Scottish norms of consensus, obliqueness, and unobtrusive conformity.

C16P5 Although the fraught and ambiguous question of Burns's political allegiances has occupied so much scholarly bandwidth in recent years, it was the coat-trailing anti-Calvinism of Burns and several of his Ayrshire contemporaries, lay and clerical, that constituted the

unambiguously radical core of the Ayrshire Enlightenment. Theirs was not an attack on religion itself, but a critique of its scholastic perversions and distortions. The Ayrshire anti-Calvinists aligned themselves with scripture—not, of course, as what we might anachronistically call fundamentalists, but as champions of scripture properly understood, namely that it propounded a religion of the heart, a religion which accorded with a benign human nature and its benevolent sentiments. In the conflict against the rigidities of Calvinist scholasticism, scripture—hard as it may be for us now to appreciate—was the weapon of liberals. The freedom of each Christian to interpret scripture on his or her own was a shibboleth of Protestantism, but it also possessed another potency, offering a critical wedge into the systemic orthodoxies of Protestant divines. If such systems were human contrivances, then invocations of sola scriptura—that is, of the Bible unmediated by priests or theologians—served, without any perceived irony, as a tool of what we would now call Enlightenment. Back then the Protestant

Enlightenment's dominant mainstream understood itself not as a repudiation of the Reformation but as an extension of Reformation principles rightly understood.

C16P6 Whereas the dominant mode of disputation within eighteenth-century Scots Presbyterianism was ecclesiological—concerning matters of church-state relations and church government, particularly the status of the offensively Erastian Patronage Act passed by the British Parliament in 1712, the Kirk's implementation of which provoked the Secession of 1733—Ayrshire, while not immune from the clamour provoked by unpopular presentations of ministers by lay patrons, also resounded to the din of theological argument. We cannot be absolutely certain how different Ayrshire was from other counties until we have detailed case studies elsewhere at a local level. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ayrshire differed in important ways from what we know of the contentions between the rival ecclesiastical factions, the moderates and the popular-evangelical party, at the national level. The principal axis of division between these parties was the law

of patronage. Theology, by contrast, was generally a matter of repression and evasion. Nevertheless, things were different in late eighteenth-century Ayrshire: there were two major heresy trials and a rumbustious—at times very sophisticated—culture of pamphleteering and versifying which engaged with some of the central themes of Calvinist theology.

C16P7 Was Ayrshire's peculiarity a product of the region's geographical location? The county was situated between the University of Glasgow, whose professoriate in the early and mid-eighteenth century had flirted with liberal heterodoxy (McIlvanney 2002: 133), and nearby Ulster, whose Scots Presbyterian settler community was riven into separate denominations by the theological estrangement of New Licht liberalism from Auld Licht conservatism (McBride 1998). At a time when communication by boat was swifter and easier than cumbersome overland transport, the Ayrshire seaboard along the Firth of Clyde experienced some degree of overspill, it seems, from the fierce theological disputes raging across the North Channel. This

is another subject which awaits further research. Ayrshire, and the south-west more generally, had also been a redoubt of seventeenth-century covenanting, and it seems plausible that it was a local diehard traditionalism of this sort that gave such articulate voice to an Auld Licht Ayrshire Counter-Enlightenment.

C16P8 Nor was the northern zone of Scots Presbyterianism and its Ulster hinterland entirely self-contained. Far from it, not only were there connections with reformed communities in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and New England, but there were also vital lines of communication with England. A vital external influence on the anti-Calvinism of the Ayrshire Enlightenment was the English dissenting theologian John Taylor (1694–1761), the author of *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin* (1740). This seminal text, which was on its fourth edition by 1767, questioned the biblical basis not only of Calvinist theology but of the Augustinian interpretation of Christianity from which Calvinism derived. His achievement was recognized north of the border by the liberal theologians of the

University of Glasgow, which awarded Taylor a doctorate of divinity in 1756 (Leask 2010: 183). According to Taylor, 'the scriptures, not the opinions of men, not of learned men' . . . were 'the rule of our faith' (Taylor 1767: 2). Was the fall of humankind as central to the Christian religion as theologians claimed? 'The consequences of the first transgression', Taylor pointed out, were 'spoken of certainly and plainly but five times in the whole Bible', twice in the Old Testament, three times in the New. In the latter, Christ himself 'saith not one word of them in any of his doctrines and instructions' (Taylor 1767: 5–6). Only Paul among the apostles had spoken of the Fall. Taylor limited the consequences of the Fall to three items, namely 'labour, sorrow and mortality', nothing more (Taylor 1767: 164). Redemption from original sin was not, he insisted, part of Christ's mission. Moreover, Taylor believed that an obsessiveness about original sin had deleterious effects on human behaviour: it undermined godliness. What, Taylor asked, could be more 'destructive of virtue' than that 'you must, in some degree or other, be necessarily vicious' as a

result of Adam's original transgression (Taylor 1767: 271)? Moreover, to depict sin 'as natural, as altogether unavoidable' seemed to provide extenuation if not justification for wickedness, and to slander a loving deity: 'Is it not highly injurious to the God of our Nature, whose hands have fashioned and formed us, to believe our nature is originally corrupted?' (Taylor 1767: 268, 271). It was medieval scholastics who had distorted the gospel message, conjuring up the 'imaginary' notion of 'imputed guilt' (Taylor 1767: 256). Therefore Taylor welcomed the Reformation, but only as the first phase in restoring the purity of the gospel from a 'very deplorable state of corruption' (Taylor 1767: 276). The Reformation had not restored scriptural purity 'all at once'; it was a process, not a completed event (Taylor 1767: 276). A further degree of enlightenment was welcome: Taylor expressed the hope that the 'the Father of lights' would 'illuminate our understandings'; that people would no longer subject their consciences to the residual 'bugbears, the tales and fables invented by priests and monks', among which he included

the doctrine of original sin (Taylor 1767: 276–7). Significantly, Taylor parsed Augustinian Calvinism not as a prime characteristic of Protestantism but as a relic of Catholicism. To be thirled to Calvinist dogma was to be incompletely reformed—to be in some degree un-Protestant.

C16P9 There were other significant connections with liberal anti-Calvinist elements in English dissent. James Wodrow (1730–1810), an important figure in the Ayrshire Enlightenment who was minister of Dunlop parish between 1757 and 1759, and then Stevenston parish from 1759, had studied at the University of Glasgow under the liberal lion William Leechman (1706–85), authoring a memoir of his influential teacher, who had become the principal of the university (see Leechman 1789). While at Glasgow, where he had been both student and librarian, Wodrow forged a firm friendship with another student, Samuel Kenrick, who went on to become a Unitarian minister in Worcestershire, and with whom he maintained a long correspondence centring on their divergence from reformed orthodoxy

(Fitzpatrick 1996; Brekke 2010: 85–6). While the flavour of the Enlightenment in Ayrshire was distinct from Enlightenment elsewhere in Scotland, its anti-Calvinist Enlightenment was far from exclusively a county-specific affair; as we have seen, not all of the ingredients were home-grown or even peculiar to Scotland.

C16P10 Regardless of such external influences, the tone and timbre of debate—in good part because of Burns, though not entirely—were utterly sui generis. Indeed, to demarcate the theological controversies of the Ayrshire Enlightenment is, in good part, to map the hinterland of Burns's ecclesiastical satires. Here ecclesiastical history and literary criticism intersect, the richness of Burns scholarship helping in no small measure to illuminate a dark and underexplored area of church history. The dramatis personae of the Ayrshire Enlightenment and its enemies—several of whom appear in Burns's poetry—belonged to two camps: New Licht liberals and Auld Licht reactionaries. There is scant evidence here of a middle ground. Local controversy was, it seems, too intense.

C16P11 It is important, however, that we do not allow the blinkers of bardolatry to distort our understanding of ecclesiastical division. The traditionalist opponents of Burns and his moderate allies were very far from being ignorant bumpkins. There were deep wells of erudition on the illiberal side, though learning of a sort which was explicitly anti-Enlightenment. Nor did the supporters of Burns and theological Enlightenment have all the best tunes. In fact, one of the finest comic writers in eighteenth-century Scotland, the anti-moderate satirist the Reverend John Witherspoon (1723–94), author of *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), was for a time aligned with the Auld Licht cause in Ayrshire while minister of Beith parish between 1745 and 1757. The richness of theological debate in late eighteenth-century Ayrshire derives not simply from the Enlightenment camp and the brio of its presiding poetic genius but also from the ingenuity, cleverness, and articulacy of the old-fashioned diehards they opposed. Without the heresy charges aired by the Auld Lichts at New Licht ministers, Burns would have lacked some of the

direct motivation for his ecclesiastical verses—and some of the liberal fire so evident in these compositions.

C16P12 The controversies that engaged Burns's wit and passion belonged primarily to the second phase of Ayrshire's late eighteenth-century Enlightenment. However, it is worth paying some attention to the disputes that preceded—and lent shape—to those of Burns's own time, for there were some intimate personal connections between these two spasms of ecclesiastical outrage and contestation. Indeed, ad hominem hatreds as well as theological positions were handed down from mentor to junior, and the second generation reprised with frills and modifications what were in substance the debates of its seniors.

C16P13 The first wave of anti-Enlightenment was directed at the figure of the Reverend Alexander Fergusson (1689–1770), the cantankerously liberal minister of Kilwinning parish in north Ayrshire (Kidd 2016). It is worth noting that Fergusson's assistant in 1760–1 had been Burns's future liberal cynosure, the Reverend William McGill (1732–

1807), later minister of the second charge in Ayr and himself the target—as we shall see—of the second wave of Ayrshire heresy proceedings, in 1789–90. In 1767 the first heresy process began, with the allegation that Fergusson denied the validity of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the definitive statement of Calvinist orthodoxy. Underpinning doctrinal differences in north Ayrshire was personal hostility between Fergusson and John Adam (1720–92), the conservative minister of the West Kilbride parish. Fergusson was identified as the author of an anonymous letter in the *Scots Magazine* justifying dissimulation in subscription to the Confession. The case for prosecution was submitted to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr 1767, and the matter was referred to the Presbytery of Irvine for investigation. The Presbytery of Irvine stalled, and in October 1768 James Macconnel appealed to the Synod against lower court's prevarication. The Synod denounced Fergusson's letter at a meeting in 1769 but, in respect of Fergusson's age, remitted matter back to the Presbytery of Irvine. The case proceeded through the

church courts between 1767 and 1769, until fizzling out on account of Fergusson's great age and infirmity. Although it was Macconnel, the supposedly illiterate town drummer of Beith, who seems to have initiated the prosecution against Fergusson, there were suspicions that the machinations behind it were influenced and possibly orchestrated by Witherspoon, formerly the minister of nearby Beith parish in north Ayrshire between 1745 and 1757, and later minister of Paisley Laigh parish in the adjacent county of Renfrewshire, until he was called in 1768 to become president of the College of New Jersey in Princeton. A pamphlet war raged alongside the lumbering ecclesiastical process. Supporting Fergusson was a minister from the nearby county of Wigtownshire, the Reverend John Mackenzie. Mackenzie defended Fergusson in *The religious establishment of Scotland examined upon Protestant principles* (1771), which he published in the aftermath of the heresy process, and also authored a sequel, *Subscription to human articles of faith examined* (1775), in reply to a local conservative diehard, the Reverend Thomas

Walker (1704–80) of Dundonald parish. Walker was part of a web of Auld Licht connections. His sister Anne (1696–1787) was married to Witherspoon, and Walker's assistant, the Reverend William Peebles (1753–1826), later minister of Newton-upon-Ayr, would in the late 1780s lead the Auld Licht campaign against the purported anti-Calvinist heretic McGill. Moreover, where Walker in the 1770s denounced the quasi-paganism he detected in the theatrical phenomenon he denounced as 'Shakespearomania' (Walker 1771: 8), his former assistant would in 1811 publish *Burnomania*, an uninhibited condemnation of the cult which was by then growing up around the memory of the heretical anti-Calvinist bard (Peebles 1811). So, in the struggle between Calvinist orthodoxy and its critics, the themes and motifs passed from one generation of Ayrshire clerics to the next.

C16P14 In a letter of 1787 to Dr John Moore, Burns recalled that in his youth, 'polemical divinity' had driven 'the country half-mad', and that he had in the course of a 'few years' begun 'to puzzle Calvinism with so much heat and

indiscretion' that he, too, was tarred with the brush of heresy (Mackay 1987: 250). Even in the comparative lull, such as it was, between the Fergusson affair and the McGill case, twenty years later, Ayrshire also witnessed a major uninhibited critique of the Augustinian foundations of Calvinist theology. The author of the attack was not a cleric but an amateur theologian, improver, and man of Enlightenment, John Goldie (1717–1809). Goldie, who was based in north Ayrshire, in the town of Kilmarnock, was a cabinet maker and wine merchant. However, he also had a range of intellectual and practical interests outside his trades. He took a keen interest in astronomy, as well as in divinity, and in the late 1790s proposed an abortive project for building a canal between Kilmarnock and the port of nearby Troon.

C16P15 Goldie launched his assault on Calvinism in a volume tamely entitled *Essays on various subjects, moral and divine* (1779), which became known colloquially as 'Goudie's Bible'. It was republished in a second edition in 1785, with a further essay, as *The Gospel recovered from*

its Captive State, and restored to its original purity (1784). Goldie was an open disciple of Taylor's case against the doctrine of original sin, but he added lines of argument which were very much his own. At bottom, Goldie was a convinced opponent of theological systems. These he believed were mere human compositions which inevitably got in the way of the divine and unmediated words of scripture. 'Those who esteem and prefer the honour of their systems to the honour of the Deity,' proclaimed Goldie, 'they are only the votaries and servants of man, and not of God' (Goldie 1779: 22). Indeed, Goldie went further—much further—identifying theologians as the unwitting instruments of the Devil. Christianity was a religion of simplicity. Whose interest did theologians serve, by introducing complexity and ambiguity into the word of God, but that of Satan himself? Goldie lamented 'that the Almighty was pleased to send meat, but the devil sent cooks. Thus it had fared too much with Christianity' (Goldie 1779: 143). Humankind, Goldie believed, was not depraved, and indeed possessed reliable, critical faculties

that enabled ordinary people to distinguish plainly between true religion and ‘counterfeit’ divinity (Goldie 1779: 90). God has given us rational powers to test the authority of systems. The only ‘true and proper test’ of what was authentic Christianity, as opposed to the perverted anti-Christianity cooked up by theologians, was whether a doctrine was conformable with ‘the moral perfections of the true God’ (Goldie 1779: 44). If a doctrine seemed twisted or tyrannical, it was not of an authentically divine provenance. Goldie insisted again and again—notwithstanding his own subtle theological arguments—on the essential simplicity of the Christian religion. He argued that whatever was ‘not of a proper quality to bear the image of God, is not sufficient to be received and accepted of as divine revelation’ (Goldie 1779: 78). Unfortunately, priestcraft had usurped the natural capacities for judgment of the laity and had ‘bewitched the people’, dividing Christendom into so many rival denominations (Goldie 1779: 82). Compounding this institutional problem of priestcraft was the psychological phenomenon of false

revelation, or enthusiasm, whereby particular zealots had imposed their own pretended personal revelations on their fellow Christians. Pseudo-revelations had snowballed into pseudo-doctrines, concealing the simple message of Christianity under mountainous heaps of divisive and corrupting error.

C16P16 Behind such abstract generalizing on the perversions of the faith, Goldie had, of course, a specific target in mind—the central incapacitating error which lurked at the heart of a grossly distorted Christian theology, the doctrine of the biological transmission of original sin. This, Goldie argued, was not, as it had mistakenly become, the central supporting pillar of Christian doctrine, but a mere 'superstitious tenet' (Goldie 1779: 108), derived not from scripture but from the work of Augustine (Goldie 1779: 189). Although a seeming commonplace in theology, original sin verged on blasphemy, for it suggested God would punish humankind in general for offences that the otherwise innocent had not actually committed. An insinuation of this sort insulted God, making him appear a

capricious tyrant. Hereditary guilt was intrinsically unjust, therefore ‘an act altogether inconsistent with God, though not with men of perverse minds’ (Goldie 1779: 131). Drawing on Taylor, Goldie also claimed that the hereditary transmission of guilt was unscriptural, ‘neither more nor less than a mere bare assertion, without the authority of so much as one text of scripture in support thereof, from either the Old or New Testament’ (Goldie 1779: 142). Almost the whole canon of Christian theology was founded on a grossly exaggerated misreading of scripture and its implications for human nature. ‘Thousands of different volumes of sophistry have been wrote,’ Goldie argued, ‘to evade the truth of this fact, that Adam’s descendants sinned not as heirs to his sin, but only from the infection of a bad example’ (Goldie 1779: 122). There was a metaphysical problem, too. If a good God did not create evil, then evil was neither intrinsic to nature nor capable of being transmitted by natural biological processes: ‘As the original of sin only proceeded from Adam, independent of his Creator, it neither did, nor could be conveyed, by natural

generation, to his posterity, for that was impossible; because sin and guilt, as a moral evil, is not a creature of God, and if not a creature, it is simply impossible that it can be procreated' (Goldie 1779: 127). It was impossible 'to procreate, and convey by generation, so much as one additional quality, than what was originally given thereto by God' (Goldie 1779: 127). The whole doctrine was inconsistent with the idea of a perfect deity. Moral evil did not arise from 'ordinary generation' (Goldie 1779: 127) but from the basic frame of the human constitution, which, while not the desolate state of reprobation described in such withering terms in the Westminster Confession, was subject to lapses.

C16P17 The fires of local ecclesiastical partisanship, it should be clear by now, did not require stoking on anything like this grandiose scale. Although Walker, the arch-conservative minister of nearby Dundonald, died in 1780, his *Essays and Sermons*, posthumously published in 1782, included the discussions 'Of Original Sin' and 'A Defence of the Calvinistical Doctrine of Predestination', composed

before the appearance of Goldie's work but contributing to that particular strand of debate (Walker 1782). On the other side of the controversy, Goldie served as a hero to Burns, a fellow critic of the cruelties of Calvinist scholasticism (McGinty 1996). In his encomium 'An Epistle to John Goldie in Kilmarnock, Author of *The Gospel Recovered*', Burns depicted the consternation that the work of Goldie (and Taylor) had on Calvinist hardliners:

C16P18 O Gowdie, terror o' the whigs,
C16P19 Dread o' blackcoats and reverend wigs
C16P20 Sour bigotry, on her last legs,
C16P21 Girns an' looks back,
C16P22 Wishing the ten Egyptian plagues,
C16P23 May seize you quick. (Burns 1969: 90)

C16P24 Superstition and enthusiasm were in retreat. Indeed, 'Auld Orthodoxy', Burns claimed, was on the point of expiry, now fighting for breath; and it was Goldie and Taylor who

were ‘the chief / To blame for a’ this black mischief’ (Burns, 1969, 91).

C16P25 It was in the interlude between the two Ayrshire heresy trials that Burns composed his most pungent anti-Calvinist satire, ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’. Although written in 1785, it was omitted from Burns’s first collection, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786); rather, it was published during the poet’s lifetime anonymously and in chapbook form, first appearing in 1789. Only in 1801 did it first appear in book form in Thomas Stewart’s *Poems ascribed to Robert Burns*, and only in 1818 did it first appear in Burns’s collected works (Scott 2015; Carruthers 2006: 35). ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’ is a masterpiece of subversive ventriloquism. Burns projects the voice and persona of an assured member of the elect and, with sudden swift switches of register from high-blown pomposity to earthy bathos, depicts double predestination in ludicrous tones:

C16P26 O Thou, that in the heavens does dwell,

C16P27 As it pleases best Thysel',

C16P28 Sends ane to heaven an' ten to Hell,

C16P29 For Thy glory

C16P30 And no' for onie guid or ill,

C16P31 They've done afore Thee. (Burns 1969: 56)

C16P32

C16P33 'Holy Willie's Prayer' also served as a rebuttal against the sneers of the Ayrshire Auld Lichts that liberal New Licht ministers were hypocrites: all too happy to perjure themselves when subscribing the Calvinist dogmas of the Westminster Confession in order to obtain their manses and collect their stipends, but reluctant thereafter to uphold these doctrines (Kidd 2017). Burns moved the question of hypocrisy onto a different terrain, pricking the godly pretensions of the unco' guid who smugly presumed themselves to be elect, but were in fact liable to the same susceptibilities of the flesh as the ordinary sinners they were so quick to castigate. Burns launched a blistering fusillade against po-faced preening of this type and the unforgiving petty authoritarianism to which it gave rise.

His immediate target was William Fisher (1737–1809), a grim, unbending elder in the congregation of the Reverend William Auld (1709–91), the diehard Calvinist minister of Mauchline parish. Mauchline had also been the scene of another controversy which interested Burns, and to which allusions surface in 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. One of his friends, Gavin Hamilton (1751–1809), a lawyer in Mauchline had been charged by Auld, a doctrinal opponent, of embezzlement from the poor fund. That charge failed, but Hamilton was then accused of neglecting the Sabbath. Hamilton appeared before the Presbytery of Ayr in 1785 and then, on appeal, the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr. Both upheld Hamilton's case. Burns wrote on behalf of his friend Hamilton, including a character sketch in his epistle 'To the Reverend John McMath' (Burns 1969: 99).

C16P34 The doctrinal-cum-personal tensions in Mauchline between the anti-Calvinist sympathizers of the Ayrshire Enlightenment and its incensed anti-Enlightenment enemies were replicated and amplified twelve miles away in Ayr itself. By the late 1780s, the town of Ayr was

renowned as a centre of liberal theology. Indeed, Holy Willie asks God to 'hear my earnest cry and pray'r / Against that Presbytery of Ayr' (Burns 1969: 59). The town's two charges were held by prominent liberals. Reverend William Dalrymple (1723–1814) was the minister of Ayr first charge, a prolific author of popularizing works that made the liberal message of the gospel accessible to a wider audience, such as *A history of Christ for the use of the unlearned* (1787). The minister of the second charge was the Reverend William McGill, who was not only allied to Dalrymple in doctrine but was also married to Dalrymple's niece. However, just across the River Ayr, in nearby Newton-on-Ayr, the parish minister the Reverend William Peebles was a fierce critic of the liberal backsliding so flagrant in the county town. It was the enmity between McGill and Peebles that would eventually bring about McGill's heresy investigation.

C16P35 However, McGill gave his enemies plenty of ammunition to use against him. In particular, McGill's substantial book on the atonement, *A Practical Essay on*

the Death of Christ (1786), provoked outrage in several quarters. McGill's concern here, as throughout his oeuvre, was on the practice of piety and virtue. McGill's primary motive was to focus on the moral practicalities, not the metaphysical mysteries, of Christ's sacrifice. This in itself was an implied rebuke to the Kirk's hardline Calvinist metaphysicians. Indeed, the work functioned as a coded repudiation of confessional orthodoxy, largely by way of its register and its patterns of emphasis. Throughout the work McGill emphasized the rationality of God's plan of redemption. This was not a mystery but part of a rational design. McGill never says so outright, but there is an all-too-obvious implication that the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession rests on swampy, unscriptural ground, and it is, besides, a cruel and incongruous intrusion within a religion of love, compassion, and benevolence. The reader is left with the impression that McGill feels enlightened distaste for the old Calvinist orthodoxy of double predestination and a limited atonement. But his opponents—alert to offensively un-Christian words, as they

saw them, like love and pardon—were well able to read between the lines. For McGill, who prioritized pardon over a supposedly implacable justice, Christ's death is a manifestation of a divine universal love extending potentially to the whole of humankind. Moreover, there was an issue of tone. McGill's God was unmistakably not the harsh, judicial deity of the Westminster Confession but a benign and indulgent god, altogether relaxed about the inevitable failings of a flawed, but intrinsically good, humanity. According to McGill, God was 'willing to overlook involuntary frailties, and smaller blemishes' (McGill 1786: 238). God knew that 'perfect obedience' was impossible for humanity, which was 'endowed with animal passions as well as reason', and whose 'constitution' was 'allied . . . both to angels and to brutes' (McGill 1786: 238). Humans were not wholly depraved, but by their nature they were midway to the angelic. A God of love, McGill insisted, had designed man for happiness. McGill was certain that 'the amiable attribute of goodness dominates in the Supreme Being, and is limited in its

exercise by nothing but unerring wisdom and rectitude' (McGill 1786: 237). He appeared to suggest that atonement was not limited to the elect. In particular, 'the perfect obedience of Christ in his death' had been so pleasing to God that it was 'very wisely made one reason for extending mercy to persons not otherwise entitled to it' (McGill 1786: 234) The remittance of sins by Christ's sacrifice seemed to extend 'to every sincere penitent' (McGill 1786: 367). McGill also issued a pointed caution against those who 'disparage' righteousness (McGill 1786: 285). His criticisms were less barbed and direct than Goldie's but no less offensive for being—as his orthodox critics saw it—sly, devious and implied.

C16P36 McGill was immediately denounced by hardline Calvinist critics as a heretic, an Arminian deviant from Calvinist dogmas of restricted election and a Socinian dissident on the doctrine of the Trinity and Christ's divine co-equal status within it. The Reverend John Russel (1740–1817), the minister of Kilmarnock High Kirk—familiarly known as 'Black Russel', but whom Burns also nicknamed

'Black Jock' and 'Rumble John'—authored an uninhibited attack on McGill (Russel 1787). Here Russel responded to McGill's mellower version of the atonement with an intensely legalistic Calvinism, which stipulated Christ's status as 'the surety of elect sinners'. Christ suffered only for 'the sins of an elect world' (Russel 1787: 31, 34). Further rumblings came from schismatic Presbyterians outside the Kirk. The Reverend James Moir, a minister of the ultra-traditionalist Burgher Secession in the village of Tarbolton, was particularly incensed that McGill was, as he saw it, a surreptitious viper within the Kirk's Calvinist citadel. The controversy raged well beyond Ayrshire, too, and an attack on McGill as a Socinian by the eminent seceder and lexicographer John Jamieson would go into a second edition (Jamieson 1790). The furore was loud and indignant, but until 1789 there were no formal proceedings against McGill.

C16P37 What tipped pamphleteering outrage into the formalities of a heresy process against McGill was the 'Appendix' McGill added to a sermon he published on the

centenary of the Glorious Revolution (McGill 1789). In this appendix—a response to the centenary sermon of his near-neighbour Peebles, a hardline traditionalist (Peebles 1788)—McGill issued a plea for ecclesiastical liberty, founded on the revolution principles of 1688, questioning the validity of confessional standards such as the Westminster Confession on the Protestant right of individual judgment. This was a step too far for the alleged deviant. A process against McGill was initiated in the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr in 1789, which enjoined the responsible body, the Presbytery of Ayr, to investigate the heretic. An appeal to the General Assembly led to the Synod being overruled; nevertheless, the Assembly asked the Presbytery of Ayr to see to it that the doctrines of the Kirk were upheld.

C16P38 Burns leapt to the defence of McGill. ‘The Kirk of Scotland’s Garland, or the Kirk’s Alarm’ was an ironic call to arms to Auld Licht Calvinists threatened by McGill’s theology:

C16P39 Orthodox, Orthodox, who believe in John Knox
C16P40 Let me sound an alarm to your conscience
C16P41 A heretic blast has been blawn i' the West –
C16P42 That what is not sense must be nonsense…

C16P43 Doctor Mac, Doctor Mac, ye should streek on a rack
C16P44 To strike evildoers wi' terror
C16P45 To join faith and sense upon any pretence
C16P46 Was heretic, damnable error. (Burns 1969: 373)

C16P47 Notwithstanding the dark humour which the poet extracted from the McGill affair, the heresy hunt was no laughing matter, as Burns himself recognized in a melancholy letter of 9 December 1789 to Robert Graham of Fintry: 'for the blasphemous heresies of squaring religion by the rules of common sense, and attempting to give a decent character to Almighty God and a rational account of his proceedings

with the Sons of Man, the poor doctor and his numerous family are in imminent danger of being thrown to the mercy of the winter winds' (Mackay 1987: 431).

C16P48 In July 1790 the Presbytery set up a committee to examine McGill's publications. In conclusion, the committee found that McGill had advanced erroneous views in five different respects, including on the doctrine of atonement and on subscription to the Westminster Confession (though arguably passing over a multitude of questionable, eyebrow-raising statements in McGill's *Practical Essay*). At a meeting of the Synod in July 1790, a compromise was found. In a somewhat contrived and evasive formula of reconciliation, McGill expressed contrition for any appearances of impropriety, notably for 'modes of expression ambiguous and unguarded', and declared his belief in the articles of the Kirk's doctrinal standards set out in the Westminster Confession (Anon. 1790: 6–12). The synod appointed McGill's equally liberal colleague and relative by marriage, Dalrymple, to give a prayer of thanks for the irenic conclusion of the process.

C16P49 This lenient outcome—a perceived stitch-up—provoked further spluttered outrage. One pamphleteer complained of McGill's 'shim-sham apology' and the toothlessness of the courts, which comprised temporizing backsliders introduced—by the foul means of lay patronage—into the bosom of the Kirk: the 1712 Patronage Act remained the root of all evil (Anon. 1792: 151, 160). Expostulation came not only from hardliners within the Kirk, but again from seceders who, as they regarded their own secession from the Kirk as a temporary matter, were just as keen as hardline churchmen to preserve the Kirk's Calvinist purity. In 1791–2 the Associate Synod of Glasgow in the Burgher Secession and its Kilmarnock Presbytery denounced McGill and the doctrinal laxity of the Kirk's ruling moderatism.

C16P50 For decades thereafter, Ayrshire was a byword for heterodoxy. In 1791 James Maxwell, the Auld Licht poetaster of Paisley, in the adjacent county of Renfrewshire, published various pieces lambasting 'these specious lights'—Dalrymple and McGill—in an anthology

of his ecclesiastical doggerel entitled *A Lamentation for the declining state of Christianity in Scotland; and especially in the town and shire of Ayr* (Maxwell 1791: 11). Maxwell feared that 'If Satan and McGill shall gain the day / Socinianism sure must bear the sway' (Maxwell 1791: 14). This charge was repeated by others. McGill and Dalrymple were known and denounced as the 'Socinian Doctors of Ayr' (Ramsay 1790: 10). As late as 1843 there was still talk of 'the Ayrshire heresies' (Struthers 1843: 360–1, 365, 367). Nevertheless, this notoriety seems to have evaporated around the middle of the nineteenth century. Only recently has Burns scholarship begun to recover the peculiarities of late eighteenth-century Ayrshire as a rumbustious anti-Calvinist outlier in Scotland's predominantly douce and sedate Enlightenment.

C16S1

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